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Opinion

Beacon Journal/Ohio.com editorial board: Trump, Tongass and Seiberling

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John F. Seiberling offered this region and the country a lesson in the value of conservation. He did so as a member of the U.S. House representing Akron and surroundings in the 1970s and 1980s. His legacy is evident in the 33,000 acres of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, plus the millions of acres in public lands protected as wilderness across the country.

Seiberling changed the model for federal land management, reflecting more than the obligation of one generation to the next to preserve our natural heritage. He advanced sound environmental stewardship. He understood, for example, how biodiversity, or complex and thriving habitats, serve the planet.

One leading aspect of the Seiberling legacy is the protection of Alaskan wilderness, including part of the Tongass National Forest, along the coastal, southeastern portion of the state. In early 2001, Bill Clinton built on the achievement. He prohibited the construction of roads in 58.5 million acres of undeveloped national forest. This “roadless rule” covered more than half of the 16.7 million acres of the Tongass. The result has been almost complete protection for one of the largest remaining temperate rain forests in the world.

That is, until now, though George W. Bush challenged the rule and lost in court. The Washington Post reported last week that President Trump has instructed the agriculture secretary to exempt the Tongass from the rule, opening 9.5 million acres to road development, and thus logging, drilling and mining.

The president’s proposal has pleased many Alaskan politicians, not to mention the timber, oil and gas industries. Yet this initiative, as John Seiberling would advise, deserves assessment from a broader perspective.

Seiberling and colleagues acted in response to decades of logging and other activity scarring the Alaskan landscape. It is easy to forget how much damage was done, roughly one-half of the Tongass old-growth forest subject to clear-cutting.

The commercial salmon fishing industry accounts for 8 percent of the regional economy.

Open the forest to logging, especially, and the fishing sector suffers. Logging disrupts the top cover, sending portions into nearby streams, muddying and warming the water. The result is fewer salmon travel up streams to reproduce, diminishing their already reduced numbers.

More, spawning salmon bring nutrients that aid forest growth.

Tourism makes up nearly one-fifth of the regional economy. The many who visit marvel at the magnificence of the sea life, the forests and the fjords. Fewer may be inclined to come if the experience includes extended patches of fallen forest, rare wilderness glaringly interrupted.

It matters, too, that disturbing old-growth forest risks accelerating climate change, or makes more difficult the task of curbing carbon emissions. Trees around for hundreds of years have absorbed much carbon. One scientist recently explained to the Juneau Empire that the Tongass alone holds 8 percent of the carbon in the lower 48 states.

Cut down those trees, and carbon returns to the atmosphere. Consider also that loggers often find defective as much as 70 percent of the old-growth trees they fell, making the practice economically inefficient and environmentally shortsighted.

Before the president's directive, the federal Forest Service had been working on a plan for modest adjustments to the roadless rule. In 2016, it identified nearly 600,000 acres for logging in the Tongass. Actually, the agency has authority to grant exemptions to the rule, and it has approved more than 50 projects.

That highlights the care required in managing such precious lands, including respect for the way of life of native Alaskans. What isn't needed is a sweeping rejection of the rule. That isn't the lesson John Seiberling taught about conservation.